

There is no 'Belgian problem' with radical Islam – only a European one

*Following the terrorist attacks in Paris on 13 November, attention has focused on the Brussels municipality of Molenbeek, where some of the perpetrators of the attacks were based. **Bart Cammaerts** writes that while Belgium undoubtedly has a long-standing problem with radical Islam, the reasons for this are also present in many other countries across Europe. He argues that all European countries will need to reflect internally on how they treat their own Muslim citizens if they are to tackle the root causes of radicalisation.*



Since the Paris attacks, a number of commentators have wondered why 'boring' Belgium has suddenly become the epicentre of political Islam in Europe. Some media sources have even labelled the Brussels municipality of Molenbeek the 'jihadi capital of Europe'.

However, while it is true that Belgium has a long-standing problem with radicalisation, many of the reasons for this are as much present in other European countries and capitals, including France. At the same time, we should not forget that it is a problem concerning relatively small numbers of individuals, which has nevertheless been blown out of proportion due to the spectacular nature of the attacks being carried out by jihadi fighters in Syria, Egypt, Lebanon and Europe.

But why is it that Belgium counts the highest number of Syrian fighters per capita in Europe? How can we explain the relatively high numbers of Belgian born young boys, mainly from Moroccan descent, that feel attracted to extreme forms of Islam, such as Salafism? The answer to these questions is complex and varied and it does not make any sense to privilege one factor over and above others.

I would say, however, that an important factor lies with the way in which European societies such as Belgium – but also France for that matter – have treated what I have called 'the other within' over the last few decades. Although these youngsters were born in Belgium or France, have Belgian and French citizenship, went to school there and are part of 'us', they are very often not treated as such, rather they are made to feel second or even third class citizens.

This manifests itself early on in the education system, which is failing them, but also in terms of the free and open circulation of deeply racist discourses in western society, as well as through the structural discrimination individuals experience when trying to find a job or housing later on in life. These factors have subsequently created a huge degree of understandable anger and frustration amongst these young people, which is now being exploited by those who want to channel such frustrations towards extremist ideologies and violent actions.

Linked to this, and exasperating the feelings of frustration, we should also consider the way in which the legal system and the police deal with these young people, using persistent stop and search methods and racial profiling in such a way that many ordinary non-radicalised Muslim youngsters feel constantly intimidated and targeted by the police and security forces. They are also more often charged with minor offences of a kind which 'white' Belgian youths are perceived as getting away with. Again, this repressive context is one example of many through which western European societies let 'the other within' know that they are not welcome and not one of them, which unavoidably creates yet further incentives for radicalisation.

What has also played a role in Belgium – as it has in France – is the existence of a far-right movement that is particularly strong in electoral terms. In the early 2000s, the Flemish far-right party **Vlaams Blok** (relaunched as **Vlaams Belang** in 2004) had substantial electoral successes, receiving over 24 per cent of the vote in the 2004 regional elections in Flanders.

In contrast to Austria, Italy and the Netherlands, however, democratic parties in Belgium pledged to keep the far-right out of power at all levels of governance – at the time this was called the *cordon sanitaire*. A problematic side-effect of this important and necessary democratic defence strategy was that genuine problems with government integration policies and issues within migrant communities, such as increasing radicalisation, were not openly discussed or addressed in democratic debates given this would (especially at that time) be seen as pandering to far-right populist ideologies.

Additionally, the international environment has played an important role in the increasing radicalisation of many young Muslims in Belgium and beyond. This international dimension manifests itself at different levels. It could be seen in terms of the involvement of Saudi Arabia in the funding of Salafist inspired Mosques. The Israel-Palestine conflict is another global contextual factor contributing to anger and frustration among Muslim youths, as are the civil wars in Syria and Iraq, fuelled by the West and Sunni/Shiite tensions.

Finally, the internet and social media is also a transnational contributing factor, localising global struggles and opening up new ways to recruit vulnerable young people. This also means that parents, as well as Imams, who very often have not grown up in the communities where they are preaching, frequently lose touch with the lives of Muslim youngsters in Europe.

Ultimately, while attention is now on Belgium and its failures in dealing with the creeping radicalisation of some of its young Muslim citizens, the reasons for this radicalisation are relevant to many other European countries and cannot be reduced to any one factor alone. Above all, European countries must show the courage to reflect internally on how they treat their own Muslim citizens in their educational systems, their job and housing markets, and in everyday life.

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About the author

Bart Cammaerts – LSE

Bart Cammaerts is Associate Professor and Director of the PhD Programme in the LSE's Department of Media and Communications.

